

## Growing to be Confident of God's Love

A great way to take the temperature of our culture  
is to have a look at the kinds of TV programmes that are being produced.  
And a staple over the last 30 years or so  
are the games where contestants are searching for love.  
In the 1980s Perfect Match was a popular game show.

These days reality TV is the popular format  
where we follow participants over a long period of time  
and where the demands on those participating are much grater.  
In fact the lengths that participants subject themselves to  
in order to find love border on the inhuman:  
Twenty or so individuals competing for the love of one person,  
where the competition includes the giving of physical affection  
(That's got to be a public health issue right there);  
other couples agreeing to be married to someone they've never even met.

It's incredible the lengths people will go to in order to find a partner.  
The more cynical among us might argue that these contestants  
are participating in order to launch a career in media.  
That maybe the case for some, and that's a problem in and of itself,  
But I think for others this really is an attempt  
to secure something they feel they need.

And in one way it's surprising that this need is so strong.  
Another aspect of our modern culture  
is that we are becoming increasingly isolated and individualistic.  
Our TV habits reflect this as well  
with the way we can now watch shows on demand when ever we decide;  
no longer waiting for the TV station to put something on before we watch it.  
But our desire to remain autonomous only goes so far,  
as the ongoing popularity of the dating genre demonstrates.

It's to this world so desirous and so starved of love and affection  
that the Bible has something remarkable to say.  
We are profoundly and passionately loved  
by a figure whose generosity and loyalty and concern for us  
far outstrips anything that a contestant might find on reality TV,  
and is even greater than any type of love we might find the old fashioned way.

It's the love that God himself has for each one of us,  
a love which is known by some of us,  
but for others perhaps feels a little elusive.  
It's a love which was a favorite topic for the Apostle John,  
and so by looking at some different passages found in John's Gospel

I hope to convince us once more, or perhaps for the first time,  
that we are dearly loved by none other than the God of the universe.

We'll begin with the most famous passage, not only in John, but in the whole Bible.

John 3:16 says that For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Famous words from the Apostle John,  
so famous that we run the risk of glazing over them in familiarity,  
but a slower reading we reveal to us again just how extensive God's love is.

For God so loved the world – There is not one person on this planet:

man or woman, young or old, rich or poor,  
dark skinned or light skinned, winner or loser,  
whom God is not interested in, whom God is wanting to overlook.  
God's love is open to everybody – and yes, that means he loves even you.

How much does he love you?

So much that John tells us He gave his one and only Son.  
This was a love that led to great sacrifice on his own behalf;  
Seeing his own son crucified on the cross for us,  
an action which Jesus *himself* willingly endured out of *his own* love for us.  
And why?

Because the world that he loves is perishing:

that whoever believes in him shall not *perish* but have eternal life.  
Not only is God's love *extensive*, not only is his love *selfless*  
It's also *astonishing* as it's directed at those who'd naturally be God's enemies.

We're all perishing for good reason,

for each one of us at various points choose to reject the God of the universe.  
Yet such is God's love *for those who reject him*,  
that he's willing, at great cost to himself, to grant us eternal life and not death.

So John 3:16 is really all about the *surprising* nature of this love that's waiting for us.

It's a bit like those stories you hear from time to time  
about musicians who receive a second career  
because they discover a secret hoard of fans in some distant country.  
They think that they're all washed up  
but then they discover that they've always been really big in Uzbekistan,  
and so once more they find themselves with an adoring public.

And so it is when we open the pages of the Bible,

because when reading of God's actions towards humanity,  
men and women, who might think that there's nothing lovable about them,  
discover that all along, the God of the universe has been longing to connect.

This is a truth that Jesus knew from his own experience.

In John 5:20 Jesus can say with certainty that  
the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.

If John 3:16 teaches us about the enormous scope of God's love,  
then a verse like John 5:20 tells us of the intimacy of God's love.  
God loves Jesus as a Father.

Now this concept might be difficult for people to hear,  
because human fathers can sometimes be so incredibly disappointing.  
We need to remember that true Fatherhood  
is that which God extends towards us,  
not the sometimes pale imitation that we try and get on with  
within our own families.

The Fatherhood of God, as it's described in John's Gospel,  
is a Fatherhood where God seeks to *include* his Son: He shows him all he does.  
As a Father he is not distant and aloof,  
But interested in his children and seeking to share what he is doing:  
A little later on in John Ch 5 Jesus speaks about the works that the Father has *given*  
me to finish...works that...testify that the Father has *sent* me (John 5:36),  
and so the Father entrusts *vital* aspects of his mission to his Son.  
And Just as the father has embraced Jesus into his mission,  
so to does he seek to include us in what he is doing in the world  
As the Father has sent me, Jesus said to his disciples, so I am sending you (John 20:21).  
When Jesus spoke of his Father,  
he spoke of a figure whom he knew was present and involved.

This is a good point to say a few things about  
the nature of this sermon series that we are beginning today.  
It's a series designed to reconnect us with our *mission* as a church,  
with our big overarching *purpose* for existence.

We exist as a place where disciples are made and grown.  
A disciple is someone who has entrusted themselves to Jesus  
and who is seeking to become more like him.  
We exist to grow more like Jesus,  
hence the name of our series *Growing more like Jesus*.  
And so over the next 10 weeks  
we'll be looking at different parts of the Gospels  
to see how it is that Jesus lived his life.  
If we are to become more like Jesus, then what was Jesus like?

And this week the first characteristic that we want to copy  
is this absolute confidence that Jesus had in the Father's love for him.

This is an important place to start,  
 because it's very easy to come up with a list of things we have to do:  
 Pray like Jesus did, preach like Jesus did and so on.  
 But we are starting with not so much an activity to do  
 but with a love to receive.

Before we are anything else,  
 Christians are people who—like Jesus—have recognized and received  
 the love that their Father in Heaven has for them.  
 A love that provided Jesus as their saviour  
 and includes them in God's ongoing plan for the world.

So how can we expect to experience this love?  
 Is it simply a case of knowing that God has sacrificed a lot for our sake,  
 or is our experience of his love even broader than that?  
 If we turn to today's second Bible reading,  
 we see the love of God has a particular modern day expression.

The final verses of John 17 contain a prayer that Jesus offered for us.  
 In this chapter, just hours before his death, we hear Jesus pray for himself,  
 then he prays for his disciples,  
 and then, v21, for those who will believe in me through [the disciples'] message  
 And if you have come to know Jesus as he is described in the NT,  
 then this is a prayer that Jesus has prayed for you.

And what does he ask?  
 v21 - that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.  
 Jesus prays that our *experience of church* might be such that we  
 experience something of the love that Jesus received from the Father.  
 As the Father shared with Jesus,  
 as he included and embraced Jesus in what he was doing,  
 so also do we include and share with one another,  
 and it's in this way that the love God has for us becomes embodied.

The kind of love that we see people vying for on TV  
 —the love where you find a partner and settle down—  
 That love is not going to be attainable for everyone.  
 There are many in the church who are unmarried,  
 there are many in the church who cannot marry  
 there are many in the church who are in dysfunctional marriages  
 And so it's vital that we take this teaching seriously,  
 the teaching that says that *our community life together*  
 is one way *we can each* experience the love that God has for us.

[In fact, I've read one theologian who suggests that fellowship in the church  
 is the primary way in which God provides for our need to receive love:

Here is a quote from Christopher Ash,  
a British writer speaking about how best to understand loneliness.

While sexual fulfillment may be one of the ways in which God remedies human loneliness, the Bible does not teach that it is the only, or even the major, remedy. The creator understands the human heart with its longings for fellowship, but it is not at all clear that sexual relationship is his general provision to meet these yearnings. **On the contrary, God's general provision for human loneliness appears to be friendship and fellowship**, both with God and with fellow believers, rather than marriage necessarily.

So he's saying that God knows our need for love,  
and the way he provides for it is through the church.]

Even if we embody that love in simple ways  
we can make a huge difference to someone.

[Just this week I was speaking with someone who conducts a simple email ministry within our church, he takes note of certain people who might be away from our fellowship for some time he'll write them a weekly note helping them keep in the loop – it's love through sharing and inclusion, a love reflecting the love of the Father for the Son]

And not only is the practice of this love  
important for the well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ,  
it also forms an important aspect of our evangelistic efforts.  
A few verses later in ch 17 in v 23  
Jesus again prays for the church's unity in love,  
And then the result of this unified love is that the world will know  
that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.  
When the world sees the way we treat one another,  
it serves as a great advertisement for the kind of love that God has to share.

I remember hearing the testimony of a young woman I used to attend church with,  
and part of her story involved one summer when she was holidaying by the beach. Also at the beach was a Scripture Union Beach Mission team,  
and it was the way that these beach mission team members treated one another that convinced my friend Julia to place her faith in the Jesus they were speaking about.  
What does Jesus say back in John 13?  
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

So this is the teaching that we can glean  
from what John's Gospel has to say about God's love:  
God's love for us is that of a committed and interested Father,  
and it's a love that's embodied for us in the life of the church.  
But I know that people can be very cynical about this.  
"If God really loves me, why is my life still so miserable?" They'll ask.

“If the church is really so loving,  
why are the people so difficult and/or disinterested?”

These are realistic and understandable questions  
because like any relationship,  
the path of love with God is not always a smooth one.

This is something that Jesus understood.

If we go back to our second verse where Jesus declares that the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does, it's worth noting that this statement comes as Jesus is defending himself against the religious leaders of the day, religious leaders who were seeking to persecute Jesus and who'd already decided that they were going to try to kill him.

Even for Jesus, the path that the Father had for him was not going to be an easy one, yet he is still able to say “The Father loves me!”  
Now that's a conviction that we would do well to imitate!  
When difficulties come our way, do we question God's love or do we double down and affirm once more – I am loved by the Father, and he does a role for me, he does have a place for me, he does have wonderful things in store for me.

Or maybe it's the love we're meant to experience within the church that makes us roll our eyes. Well, again Jesus knew something about the imperfect nature of Christian fellowship. He was willing to call the disciples his *friends*, yet he was betrayed by Judas, disowned by Peter, and disbelieved by Thomas. It's interesting, the command to love one another comes after Jesus announces Judas' betrayal. It's as if Jesus is saying “Yes, Christian love is imperfect, but I want you to persist in it anyway. Keep loving one another”

So, like Jesus, are you confident of God's love for you?  
Or perhaps you see things like this cartoon...a young girl being denied a good gift from God who is holding it out of her reach.

Many people feel this way I think, but the cartoon doesn't tell the whole story.  
We need to add some other gifts into the picture, gifts already given to the young girl: forgiveness of sins, a role in God's mission, fellowship with other believers, as well as family, friends, the world in which she lives, and a gift yet to be opened - eternal life. That's the picture that the Bible actually paints, it's the picture Jesus understood for himself, and it's a picture he'd have us take to heart as well.

Prayer.

Convived enough to start with God, convinced enough to finish with him.